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The Laughing Peril
Death Counts Five
The Girl in the Green Coat
The Red Dancer of Moscow
Here Comes the Bandwagon
Within the Seventh Veil
Auction of Souls
Lipstick
Joanna
Vivian
Etc.

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The
HOUSE
of
MURDER

H. L. GATES

JACOBSEN PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
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The HOUSE *of* MURDER

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Chapter One

AN EMPTY JEWEL CASE

FOR fifteen minutes Basil Towne had stood face to face with murder. It was not a pleasant presence, that presence of death intruding into the fragrant quiet of a peaceful, summer afternoon.

But, suddenly, Basil Towne faced something more;—the cold, hard scrutiny from the questioning eyes of a representative of the police.

The fragile body of the pretty Baroness Hilda lay between them on the vivid green rug of her drawing room. She lay where she had fallen, twisted into a pathetic heap, one arm outstretched. Beyond his own hasty examination of her pulse, Inspector Lacrosse would not permit that she be disturbed until the arrival of the medical officials.

Across the room a frightened servant girl with wide blue eyes hovered, alternately muttering prayers that her mistress come back to life, and sobbing in semi-hysteria.

Basil had been gazing down into the inert face of the Baroness, framed in the coiled plaits of tawny hair that had so fascinated him. He couldn't believe that the lips that had been so alive were forever still. An intui-

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tive alarm brought up his glance to meet the distinctly unfriendly stare of the police officer.

In his hand the Inspector held a silk-lined, bronze jewel case, empty, its cover lifted back. He tapped the box with a finger and spoke sharply.

"You say that in this case were the Harlequin pearls?"

"There is no doubt of it," Basil declared. He concealed with an effort his irritation at the other's manner. "The Baroness had promised that I might see them this afternoon. She invited me to come at four o'clock. I arrived at that time. There is no question that she had brought the Harlequins into the drawing room, in their case, and was waiting to receive me when the—when this! happened."

From the other side of the room came a cry from the weeping servant. "Yes—yes indeed, sirs! But two minutes—one minute—she had left me, in the hall, to come in here, the jewels were in her hand, when I heard that sound——!"

The Inspector silenced the girl with a commanding gesture that sent her, in a new panic, back into her corner. During her interruption he had not broken his stare at Basil. The latter flushed, but met the other's watery grey eyes steadily.

Lacrosse, a shaggy, heavy-featured man who moved slowly, grunted at last and stepped across the room into a panel of low afternoon sun that came into the room through wide French windows. Three paces from the windows he stopped, bent to the floor, and looked back at Basil.

"If you please," he demanded, "be good enough to show me where the box lay when you discovered it."

The younger man went over and with his foot indicated a spot on the floor full within the shaft of waning sunlight.

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"Approximately here."

"And it lay—so? On one side, its lid closed?"

"Yes. Evidently the cover snapped shut when it fell. That is very much what its position was." Basil frowned and added, apologetically: "I should not have fingered it, or disturbed it, I know. But I was overwhelmed. I thought only to verify what was unfortunately too evident. That—this!—had been done for the pearls, almost at the moment of my coming, and that they were really gone."

Any other than the stolid Lacrosse would have been impressed by the genuineness of the young man's distress. His inner horror of the scene he was part of was written plainly in his face, a troubled face that, at another time, would be almost boyish, with a genial effect of good humor.

The Inspector rose, leaving the jewel case where he had placed it on the floor. A uniformed policeman, one of a pair who had arrived with Lacrosse and had been ordered to examine the gardens that surrounded the Baroness' house, appeared at the French windows.

He reported briefly. "We have discovered nothing yet, sir."

His superior gave him a curt order. "Continue. A footprint. A disarrangement of shrubbery. Something. Find something,——" Basil was watching him and angrily clenched his fists when, with a deliberate pause, the Inspector turned his watery eyes full upon him before he concluded: "Find something—if you can."

The policeman at the window saluted and disappeared to rejoin his companion in the yards. The Inspector produced from an inner pocket a notebook and pencil. He spoke in more courteous tone, now, but, curiously, Basil did not feel relieved. He braced himself instinctively.

"While we await the wholly needless arrival of the

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medical examiner," said Lacrosse, "I will trouble you to repeat, if you please, the circumstances of—ah!—four o'clock."

He began to make entries in his notebook while he continued speaking.

"I have your name, and that you are an American, stopping at Mentone. You have stated that you were sent to France by an American syndicate—did you say, from Massachusetts?"

"From Worcester, Massachusetts, which happens also to be my home."

The Inspector made an entry and finished his broken sentence "—— to propose the purchase of the Harlequin pearls from their last owner, the Baroness von Stromberg. You have said that the negotiations were proceeding. It occurs to you to examine the pearls themselves."

The Inspector poised his pencil and looked at the other man. "Was that desire prompted by the wish to assure yourself that the Baroness actually was in possession of the pearls? Or did you wish to be certain of their value?"

Basil replied with asperity.

"I could have no occasion to doubt the ability of the Baroness to deliver the jewel. Any transaction would have been concluded at a bank. Nor would I be able to pass upon their value. I have only an amateur's knowledge of gem values. I have explained, and I repeat it, that I was only curious to see the Harlequin pearls. I, like anybody else, naturally would get a thrill out of holding in my hands the world's most famous string of jewels. The Baroness was very gracious. She quite understood, if you do not."

The Inspector protested blandly. "I do understand, sir. Quite. The Baroness agreed that you should come here, where she has lived virtually alone since the war

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reduced her fortunes, at four o'clock this afternoon. She would spread before you the Harlequins which she was hopeful of selling to your syndicate. I quite understand. And now, if you please—will you repeat your account of what happened this afternoon?"

Basil glanced at the quiet body on the floor, but shut his lids quickly to blank out the unhappy sight. He moved so that he might face the Inspector without conscious vision of the poor Baroness.

"I timed my drive from Mentone," he said, "to arrive here as near to four as possible. I glanced at my watch while I was passing through the gate that opens from the road. It was precisely four o'clock then."

"Did you descend to open the gate yourself?"

The servant girl, who remained in the background and was now moaning quietly, again interrupted. "The gate is open all day, sir. I am the only servant my poor mistress has kept. We were to have a cook, another house girl, and a butler when she had sold her necklace. We were to have grand times again, sir, that's what she was counting on——."

Lacrosse threatened the girl with a heavy scowl and a sharp word, but she insisted upon finishing her say.

"I'm explaining, sir, why the gate from the road is always open. I could not go running to open it at all times of the day when I must be tidying the house and attending mistress. So I opened it each morning. Anyone could come and go without stopping."

The Inspector waited for Basil to continue.

"She has answered that question," he said. "I came along the motor path, through the front lawns, and parked my car, it is the blue coupé you see from here, at one side of the steps that lead up to the porch. I had just touched the bell when I chanced to turn my head so that my glance fell into this room through the windows. If you will stand outside the door, on the

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porch, you will see that the wall of this room takes an angle which permits anyone standing at the door to see inside quite plainly. You will observe that the curtains are drawn, leaving the view unobstructed.

"I was startled to see the form of a woman stretched on the floor, where the Baroness lies now. I came to the window for a closer view. Just then the maid opened the door."

The Inspector flipped a page of his note book. He looked at his watch and muttered: "The medical examiner takes his own time to arrive." He nodded to Basil, then, to continue.

"To the maid," Basil went on, "I exclaimed, 'Your mistress!' Without waiting for her to reply, or show me to the drawing room, I brushed past her and threw open the doors. The girl behind me screamed when she, also, saw the Baroness. I called to the Baroness, and dropped beside her. I realized quickly that she was dying. The red stain on her frock was slowly spreading. She breathed her last as I bent down to her."

"I think you stated that she did not speak?"

"She was too far gone. It struck me at once, from the position of the wound, directly over the heart, that she must have been shot only a minute or two before I burst into the room. I know from my trench experience that one dies very quickly from a bullet in the heart."

There was another cry from the maid. This time, in her eagerness, she ran into the center of the room, closer to the body of her mistress than she had as yet approached it. "That was the sound I heard," she half screamed. "It was the shot that killed my mistress. Just before the bell rings. First I hear the sound. I am scared. I think it is a bullet. Then the bell rings. I say, No, I am foolish. It is but an automobile noise from the road. Or I am mistaken and do not hear anything

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at all. I answer the bell. He——" She pointed a wildly shaking finger at Basil. "He pushes open the doors and then I see——!"

The girl's voice, which had risen to a thin scream, broke. She dug her hands into her face, distorting her features until her eyes stared through her fingers, two great wells of horror. Strangely, Lacrosse was silent. Basil thought the quivering, crouching girl would collapse across the body of her mistress. He started toward her, to support her.

With a piercing shriek the girl leapt backward, fending Basil off with both her arms flung out, her hands flattened against him. Her shrill scream beat against his ears.

"Don't let him—keep him away. It was him—— He killed my mistress—through the window—I heard it —then the bell!"

Basil froze, his arms still held out in their impulse to catch and support the girl. He stared while the girl, overcome by her paroxysm, crumpled at last, into an unconscious heap beside the lifeless Baroness.

The shaggy Inspector brought him to his senses with a throaty grunt. He wheeled to meet the watery eyes calmly studying him.

"The servant's conclusion is interesting, sir," said Lacrosse. "Unless I am shortly given sufficient reason to adopt some other theory, I shall ask you to agree with me that the Baroness von Stromberg was alive and well, and that the Harlequin pearls were in their case, when you arrived, at four o'clock."

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Chapter Two

THE CRYSTAL SWAN

THE hysterical accusation of the servant, he knew her simply as "Marie," affected Basil deeply. When his first shock at her screaming outbreak passed, a cold chill had begun to creep through him. Her pathetic grief, in that room of stark tragedy, was bound to add a dangerous importance to her crazed belief that he had sent a bullet to the Baroness, from the porch, snatched the priceless Harlequins from their bronze box, and then calmly rang the door bell.

In the second of intervening silence between her collapse and Lacrosse's heavy speech, he realized that his uncomfortable position had indeed become threatening. Unless those fellows who were combing the yard found some evidence of a fugitive who had made an escape through the grounds!

But the Inspector's deliberate, preposterous charge roused in him a totally different feeling. Here was a man who would have no other interest save justice, or, possibly his own credit. He ought to use good common sense.

His blunt inferences aroused Basil's hot anger. Heated retort rose to his lips, but he remembered—

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where he was!—and restrained his impulse. He shrugged his shoulders and observed, grimly:

"It's a long way from Massachusetts!"

Both men were stooping to lift the unconscious Marie to a couch. The Inspector paused to regard Basil blankly. The latter nodded coolly.

"If we were in Worcester, I'd punch your head, you know!"

"We are not in Worcester, sir," Lacrosse returned, stolidly.

The intended ministration to Marie, who was now breathing quietly in what could have been to her only a blessing of oblivion, was interrupted by the noisy stop outside of a heavy car which had come along the graveled motor path at furious speed.

Lacrosse stepped around the body on the green rug and opened the drawing room doors.

"We shall proceed, now, with more order," he said. "The medical examiner arrives!"

Basil had expected a solemn, long-visaged French official. Dr. Marsac was an opposite character. Indescribably fat, with short, chubby legs, and face as round as a plate, set with two eyes which were perpetually cast in a twinkle. He paused at the threshold, filling the door space with his wide bulk, his pudgy hands rubbing their palms together across his great round stomach.

However, Lacrosse accorded this curious medical examiner a profound respect. He bowed with stiff formality, first to Dr. Marsac himself, then to a younger, alert and efficient looking man who, apparently, was the medical examiner's assistant. This second man carried a case of instruments which, even while he stood behind his superior, unable to enter the room past that huge bulk, he was opening in readiness for any emergencies.

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"The remains have not been disturbed, sir," Lacrosse announced, importantly. "They are at your command."

Dr. Marsac swept the room with a twinkling glance, his hands still rubbing. "Well, well! You produce murder, Inspector. Good fortune for the policeman, eh? But how sad the occasion for the rest of us!"

Dr. Marsac's voice boomed pleasantly. So pleasantly, in that scene of dread solemnity, that Basil was hurt,—hurt for the poor, pretty Baroness Hilda, who was willing to give up the last and greatest of her treasures that she might live "grandly" the life she loved so well! That pleasant, booming voice was almost a sacrilege.

Yet, after awhile, Basil was to acknowledge a respect, even more profound than that of Inspector Lacrosse, for the rotund Dr. Marsac.

The medical examiner stepped into the room.

"Ah! Two of them. Well, well, Inspector! Have two while you're about it, eh? Do it right when you—But no! This one breathes!"

With an incredibly long stride for his pudgy legs he stood over Marie. He beckoned with both short arms to his assistant.

"You imbecile! You snail! One breathes and you stand there! Onto the couch. Quickly."

He swung around upon Lacrosse. "Why did you not put the breathing one onto the couch? You are an ass, Inspector! You are aware that I cannot stoop."

"She fainted. That is all," Lacrosse explained.

Dr. Marsac immediately dismissed Marie from his attention, leaving his assistant to revive her.

"Then you are not an ass, Inspector. In this instance. I withdraw it. I withdraw also my compliments upon the double nature of your sad crime. Remember that!"

"It is serious enough as it is, sir," the Inspector returned respectfully.

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Dr. Marsac exhibited that he could stoop, when put to it. He somehow got his knees under him and was down beside the Baroness. Basil was amazed by the skillful deftness of the fat fingers that flew to the still pulse, tested muscles for their stage of rigor mortis, straightened twisted limbs, and with a tender touch wrought a peaceful calm in the face that had been pain wracked.

Lacrosse offered: "She was dead, when I arrived."

"Quite so. Practically instantly. She heard the explosion but never knew what caused it. Very pretty woman. Damn shame. You policemen should take better care of pretty women!"

While he spoke, voice booming out cheerfully to fill the room, Dr. Marsac crawled on his ridiculous hands and knees to where his assistant had deposited his case on a chair while he worked over Marie, who was now moaning softly. He clutched the case and brought out instruments he required to probe for and trace the bullet. He crawled back puffily to the prostrate Baroness.

Basil turned quickly away from the sight of the white breast and shoulder the medical examiner uncovered. He glanced to the couch where sat Marie, the assistant standing close by. She shrank from his gaze as if it stabbed her. He wanted to go to her, but feared to rearouse her hysteria.

At the windows Lacrosse was conferring with his two men, who had come onto the porch from the grounds. The Inspector was demanding:

"But no footprints? On the path? The grass? In the shrubbery?"

One of the uniformed men answered his chief. "The paths all are graveled. They'd keep no marks. No one has been across the lawns or gardens, so far as we can see, on any side of the house. The bushes along the

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road are faced on the outside by a wooden wall. Maybe you noticed that, sir, as we came up. There are no signs there. And it seems to us that anyone going out would have taken the open gate. There was no need to climb the wall."

"Have you examined the road? Tire tracks? Other marks in the dust?"

"There's many a tire track. Cars are coming and going all the time. They use the side of the road, close in. The marks couldn't be untangled. There's no sign of feet."

"What about the garages and other outhouses?"

"We went through the servants' quarters carefully, sir. What servants there are here now, must live inside. The quarters have not been occupied, we should say, for a long time." The speaker looked at his companion for verification of this statement. The other said:

"There's dust and dirt enough about to've been gathering for a year. Nobody's been in the servants' quarters for a long time, I should say."

"The garage was locked," said the first man. "I went in through a window. Nobody hiding there. But I say, Inspector." He pointed to the porch floor, between the windows and the house door. "Have you noticed here, sir? There's footprints here. Shall we take a pattern of these?"

Lacrosse replied, without looking down. "I think there's no need. But we shall see." He motioned Basil to approach.

"I suppose they're mine," Basil said, "if there's any there. I came up to the window, you remember."

"I remember," said Lacrosse, dryly. "If you please, just the same! Your foot, just so!"

Basil stepped through the window. On the porch floor, which was of boards, was a faint, unshapen patch of grey. To Basil's eye it meant nothing. To the others

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it was a footprint. And their practiced eyes fitted the mark instantly to Basil's shoe.

"Thank you," said the Inspector heavily. Basil thought he detected a tone of smug satisfaction. He said, sharply:

"You'll not be calling that progress? Or a clue of some kind? You knew they would be mine, right enough. I have explained them."

"I have a full note of your explanation. As I have suggested, I shall perhaps ask you soon to enlarge upon it. The medical examiner is calling."

They stepped through the windows into the room, Lacrosse pausing to instruct one of his men to take post at the gate, and the other to stand by within the windows. Basil, watching through a corner of his eye, saw a sign pass between the man and his chief—a sign that clearly had to do with him. A bit of the chill he'd thrown off returned.

Dr. Marsac was on his feet, beaming genially. He indicated Marie. "The surviving lady, eh, Inspector? Professionally, I suggest the quiet of her room. She does not take death as philosophically as she should. My assistant will remain with her, if you suggest it? Perhaps she is a witness to—something, eh?"

Dr. Marsac had at least a touch of humanity, Basil thought. It would be cruel for Marie to remain in the room longer than necessary. The Inspector agreed at once.

"I have her story. I shall perhaps want to question her again, but not now."

Marie went out, on the young assistant's arm. Dr. Marsac held up two fingers, a misshapen bullet between their tips. "Such a little thing, gentlemen," he said in great good humor, "to separate two worlds, this and the next, is it not?"

He dropped the bit of lead into Lacrosse's palm

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gingerly. The Inspector wrapped it in a bit of paper and dropped it into his wallet.

"Now then," Dr. Marsac went on briskly, "I take it the Inspector will want to know all sorts of things, where the little message of death was delivered from, matters like that which the police think their business. So, Inspector?"

"I should be glad to know, sir, whatever you can tell me that will be of help. I have certain ideas I am ready to adopt or dismiss, either way, as soon as you are finished."

"You'll probably dismiss them, Inspector. First ideas like a first love shouldn't be kept going too long. You observe that we leave the—ah!—the unfortunate Baroness where we, you, or," he glanced to Basil merrily, "where you discovered her. For just a little while. But a pillow for her head. Ah, thank you!" This last, to Basil, who had quickly brought a cushion from an Empire davenport which flanked a fireplace in one end of the room.

With the doctor's nod of assent, Basil lifted the tawny head and rested it in the hollow of the pillow.

The eyes of the Baroness had been closed by the ministering fingers of the medical examiner, but Basil fancied that they thanked him through the curtain of their lids. He had never been quite so close to the silence that is death as when he bent to fix the pillow. He wished he knew, and could say it, a brief prayer of some sort.

Dr. Marsac watched him. His booming voice commented: "Such a very pretty woman indeed! You should persuade your criminals to use discretion, Inspector."

When Basil straightened the medical examiner was again rubbing his chubby hands across his stomach. He regarded Basil in a friendly manner.

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"I can tell by the Inspector's watchfulness," he said, "that you are his suspected criminal. And you are—what?"

"A business acquaintance of the Baroness only." Basil's answer was stiff. The other seemed to him more of a billiken out of a toymaker's shop window than a government's agent in the disposal of death.

"Ah, well," observed the doctor. "I envy you. To be suspected of murder on such a pleasant afternoon! An experience to remember. And our friend Lacrosse's nostrils are quivering like those of a bloodhound on the scent each time he looks at you."

The shaggy Inspector colored angrily and opened his mouth to speak. Dr. Marsac raised a fat hand, dramatically.

"Don't deny your nostrils, Inspector. They quiver. And presently they shall quiver, oh! so violently. I promise you!"

He turned to Basil. "Condone our police friend for his first ideas, young man. Presently he will have others. They will be the ones to take seriously."

Basil was at a loss what to say, or how to take Dr. Marsac. The latter gave him no time to choose a reply. His good humor seemed to fall, as a cape falls. His round face took a serious cast.

"Now," he announced, "with the Inspector's permission we shall reconstruct the first episode of today's affair. When the Inspector has made his comments I shall produce a little climax that will be wholly outside my duties as medical examiner. Perhaps the Inspector will forgive me." He looked to Lacrosse, who managed a respectful gesture.

Basil had the sense of something impending. This Dr. Marsac was a strange personality but, suddenly, he had become impressive. He stood beside a tapestried chair, flanked by a taboret, at the edge of the green rug,

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slightly across the center of the room and directly in line with the porch windows.

"The Baroness sat here," he said. "There was a sound at the windows. An apparition. The Baroness rose. You will observe the chair has been moved from the taboret, not by hand, but by a body in it—a little more and the taboret would have been upset in the riser's haste." He turned to Basil. "The Inspector will be convinced that apparition was you, sir. I've no doubt you will deny it. One always denies such things. So we will leave it to the Inspector to conclude if, you not being a stranger, she would have risen so hastily as to have almost knocked over her taboret."

It occurred to Basil to say: "She expected me. She was waiting for me."

"One may never foresee the interposition of fate, in even the most pleasant of rendezvous! She expected you but, ah! it is a shot, not a greeting, that she received from the window, which in rising she faced. The direction of the bullet was straight from the window. It found the heart, true! She stumbled forward. Two paces. That would be all for one whose heart carries such a grim intruder. And there, where she now lies—she fell!"

"Thank you," said Inspector Lacrosse. "I was convinced that the bullet came from the window. Not more than a moment before the maid servant opened the doors to admit this gentleman." He glanced at Basil. "This gentleman telephoned to us. I was on the ground within ten minutes. We find nothing. Trace of no one, save——"

Dr. Marsac, beaming, finished for him. "This young man, eh! And he, as his foot marks reveal, was at the window before our little maid admitted him. No trace of anyone else? Nothing else, Inspector?"

Lacrosse was puzzled. "Only the motive of the crime.

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I may not have mentioned it before. That box, by the floor near the windows. The maid informed me, and this young gentleman agrees, that it had contained jewels of enormous value."

The Inspector paused to procure effect.

"None other, sir, than the Harlequin pearls. You know them?"

"Ah!" Dr. Marsac's exclamation was long drawn. "The Harlequin pearls! I recall. They belonged in a Stromberg family. The Baroness is the last of her clan. And so they are gone. Ah me! That explains—the rest!"

He stood over the pillowed head of the form on the floor, and beckoned to Lacrosse, who was about to ask what it was that the theft of the pearls explained—other than, obviously, the crime that had been done for them. But Dr. Marsac was continuing, with something of a stage director's manner.

"I did not have her lifted or disturbed," he said, "for a reason. A point was missing. I wished to arrive at the point. We arrive at the theft of the Harlequin pearls, jewels of destiny! Dear, dear! I should like to have seen them. But I digress. Who, Inspector, would you prefer above all others to be your thief of the Harlequins?"

Lacrosse frowned, and ran his fingers through his shaggy hair. He did not quite know how to take the medical examiner, whose duties should have finished when he had certified death, the direction of the bullet, and contributed what he could from the condition of the body, its position and marks. Basil studied the two men, the stolid Lacrosse who would stick stubbornly to any notion that sank into his skull, and the human butter ball of a medical examiner who would play the clown in a morgue.

"I prefer no thief from another," Lacrosse declared, stoutly. "Or murderer either, so far as that goes."

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Dr. Marsac raised his hands in a protest of contradiction. "But you will, my friend. You will. What will you say if I present you a thief who is the perfect match to the Harlequin pearls—like them, the greatest in her class? Eh? What would you say to that, Inspector?"

"I don't know what you mean," puzzled Lacrosse.

Basil was certain, now, that events were to take some unexpected turn. And he made a discovery. The twinkle had gone from Dr. Marsac's eyes, and those eyes, seeming to dance over Lacrosse, really were watching him out of their corners. They continued to return to him, in that cornerwise twist, while he issued directions to the Inspector.

"Put your hand under the Baroness. There is a tangle of gown just above her waist, at her back, which I caused when I lowered her frock from her chest. There is something there, caught in the tangle of the dress. I found it there. But I left it, I wished to preserve to you, Inspector, the occasion to bring it out with your own fingers. Am I not thoughtful of the prerogatives of the police, my friend?"

"What is it?" demanded Lacrosse.

"A pretty little souvenir. Left purposely behind. I couldn't account for it until you told me jewels were stolen also. When you have brought out your hand, dear Inspector, you will know whom to charge with the murder of our unhappy Baroness and the robbery of her Harlequin pearls."

With a mystified expression, and somewhat grumpily, Lacrosse got to one knee, flattened his hand to the floor and slid it under the lifeless form. Dr. Marsac rubbed his hands and seemed to repress insistent chuckles.

Suddenly Lacrosse ceased groping. He frowned, then looked up to the doctor with a jerky lift of his head.

"Bring it out," said the medical examiner.

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The Inspector stood up. In his palm lay a bit of sparkling crystal, exquisitely carved in the shape of a tiny swan.

Basil drew closer to examine the little image. Somehow this was the medical examiner's climax, and he knew, instinctively, that it would have much to do with him. Dr. Marsac had never left off that sly scrutiny of his face—and was watching him now.

Lacrosse spoke at last, lifting his watery eyes to stare at the medical examiner.

"Good God, sir! This means that it was she—this—this is her mark!"

"The Swan!" said Dr. Marsac. "And she laughs at you fellows, as usual. A pretty big case, Inspector."

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Chapter Three

A LADY OF DEATH

IT was not until the following morning that Basil gathered a coherent understanding of the amazement in Lacrosse's stolid face when he looked up from the little crystal souvenir in his hand, and of the meaning of Dr. Marsac's: "A pretty big case, Inspector."

It remained for the ponderously genial medical examiner to enlighten him.

Upon his arrival in Europe Basil had chosen to stay at Mentone, close to the border between France and Italy, because of its proximity to the home of the Baroness von Stromberg, which sat in one of the small estates that line that section of the Mediterranean coast. His quarters were a small but comfortable suite of rooms in a quiet hotel, the "Riviera," on the broad Avenue des Italiens.

He finished an early breakfast and went out into the Avenue for a breath of the mimosa-scented morning air, and amused himself for half an hour identifying the agent of police detailed by Lacrosse to keep him under constant surveillance.

He had discovered the police agent, or another in similar plain clothes garb, within an hour after his return to his hotel on the evening before. This morning

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the policeman, in the pose of an idler who like himself enjoyed the fragrance of morning, loitered on the opposite side of the Avenue. He remained in sight during Basil's half hour stroll. Apparently he had little thought to disguise his observation, and remained at a distance only as a gesture of courtesy.

Basil smiled to himself before this sign of Lacrosse's stubborn doubts. It was not long, however, before his smile gave way to a perplexed frown and a half muttered exclamation.

The police agent in turn was being shadowed!

Basil was sure of it. Out of the early pedestrians along the Boulevard of the Italians, bright shop girls with eager faces, alert tradespeople hurrying briskly to their day's business, he easily picked the second lounging figure which seemed to hover, at every turn, at some point between him and the representative of the watchful law.

This was a furtive figure in long peaked cap drawn deep over eyes so small that they could hardly be distinguished at twenty yards. A wiry little chap, this one, whose very gait, as well as his clothes and general appearance, suggested darker by-ways than the broad sunlit Avenue.

He was a skillful shadower. The police agent was never out of his view but quite plainly was unaware of his existence. He preferred the same side of the street Basil chose, which might have revealed him to the policeman who, keeping well in advance of Basil, must be watching backward at every step from the corner of his eye. But the little fellow seemed to sense each backward glance of the man he watched and at the exact moment of them would be nowhere to be seen.

Then he would reappear, hugging closely to the shade of the Avenue's palms. At times he was little

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more than a few feet from Basil, whom he appeared not to notice.

Basil was of half a mind to execute a quick flank movement that would bring him face to face with the police agent, say a pleasant good morning and warn him of his own menacing shadow. He would take a considerable amount of amusement from this turning the tables.

While he deliberated over this impulse, Basil was thunderstruck.

The little fellow, wraith from the underworld surely! was pursuing a double purpose. He watched and avoided the unknowing police agent, but what he wanted was to speak to Basil unobserved by the other.

There was no doubting it. The little chap had some sort of message to deliver. And whatever his mission it must not be detected by Lacrosse's man. For, unmistakably, he had signalled to Basil. It was at a moment when, with a quick darting from the shelter of one palm tree to another, he had drawn almost within arm's reach of Basil. He signalled to the American to walk quickly up, and pass.

But his intuition warned him that the watcher across the street had paused, ostensibly to look into a house garden, but really to cast a glance backward across his shoulder. Instantly the little fellow slunk against a palm trunk.

Basil passed on. While he pondered this amazing turn of events he came up to his hotel. A heavy car, shining black, was drawn up in front. He recognized it, with a start, as the medical examiner's.

Dr. Marsac's chubby legs propped his wide frame in the hotel portals and his hearty voice boomed a greeting, pleasantly.

"I was distressed to leave you yesterday with a disagreeable companion. Gloomy soul, Lacrosse. Gloomy,

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and dumb. I sympathized with you. I would like to know more of you."

The doctor sighed cheerfully and continued. "I come to inquire after your night's sleep. Restless feeling, I imagine, being associated with murder."

"I slept," said Basil shortly, "better than Inspector Lacrosse would have had me. I suspect that his man —you can see him if you look directly across the street —already has reported that I am suspiciously innocent looking this morning."

"Poor Baroness," murmured Doctor Marsac. "And her priceless pearls. Both gone. And the poor Inspector. His biggest case gone, too."

"What's that?" Basil exclaimed. "I don't understand. Has he solved it—does he know——?"

"Ah, yes! He knows. But what does he know? That The Swan is somewhere about. Or was. That she must have the Harlequin pearls. But that is too much for our Inspector Lacrosse."

Dr. Marsac assumed a great show of seriousness. He tapped Basil's shoulder confidentially.

"If you know anything about it, my friend, Lacrosse will never forgive you. For not confessing to him straight off, I mean. He'll blame you for holding back while they supersede him with another man who is even now on his way from Paris. If this other one matches you up with The Swan, when Lacrosse couldn't, the Inspector will be your enemy for as much of your life as the magistrates may leave to you."

Basil laughed heartily. "I expect to live a long time, Doctor, and in the free security of my native Worcester."

The medical examiner beamed at once, much relieved. "I hope so. I hope so. This other man will guillotine somebody. He has a reputation for that. It may as well be somebody else."

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"Thank you, Doctor. From the bottom of my heart. And this other man? A super sleuth of some sort?"

"The Great Giroff."

Basil had not believed for a minute that Dr. Marsac had dropped in upon him for a polite inquiry as to his health, or to cement an acquaintance begun under the tragic atmosphere of yesterday afternoon. At least, not solely. Now he was convinced that the jolly medical examiner had some additional purpose. As yesterday, when he manœuvered Lacrosse into finding, "with his own fingers," the little crystal carving, so now the doctor glanced keenly at Basil from the corner of his eye when he said: "The Great Giroff."

Basil gave no sign that he had noticed his visitor's scrutiny. "That name means as much to me, sir," he said, "as does that of the precious lady you mention, The Swan, or the other name I heard a score of times while Lacrosse and his superiors grilled me, last night, through two hours at the police bureau."

"Ah, another name?"

"I came away from the grilling with only two definite conclusions in my mind. One, that the police refused to be satisfied about me. The other, that besides The Swan they implicate also an individual Lacrosse muttered about as 'The Man With The Duck's Bill.' When they sent me home—with a man following me—I'd learned nothing of either. Now you expect me to know your Great Giroff."

Basil paused, then proposed that his visitor make himself as comfortable as he could in such chairs as his sitting room would afford and perhaps have an early brandy and soda. He agreed willingly when Dr. Marsac suggested that, instead of the brandy and soda, he initiate him into the mysteries of a good, plain American highball.

"If you will be so good as to permit me," said Basil

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when his visitor had expressed an enthusiastic appreciation of the highball, "I shall ask you presently, 'who is Giroff?' Meanwhile I've a curiosity you'll forgive to know who the devil is The Swan—and The Man With The Duck's Bill."

Dr. Marsac's boisterous laughter flooded the room, his coat shaking violently over quivering rolls of fat beneath it.

When he had subsided he said: "Forgive me, my friend. I thought how Lacrosse would enjoy hearing you. He swears you are the agent of one, The Swan, and are either The Man With The Duck's Bill or his successor. Don't tell me you plan to disappoint him by turning out to be neither!"

"Over another highball let us suppose that I turn out to be what I am—a very disappointed bidder for the Harlequin pearls," returned Basil. He felt that he ought to be provoked by this clownish medical examiner, but wasn't quite certain.

Dr. Marsac put down his glass and rested a hand on either stub of knee. A bit of the twinkle went out of his eyes.

"The Swan," he said, "is a young and beautiful woman, for what may we say of any woman and remain polite, save that she is young and beautiful? Even though we have not set our eyes upon her. And The Swan, my friend, is a Lady of Death, whom none has seen or known unless——" the doctor paused. "Unless," he finished, "Lacrosse is right and you could tell us who she is."

Basil smiled in his face and waved his hand toward the glass on a table by the doctor's chair. "I asked you to assume, remember? that I couldn't."

Dr. Marsac heaved another of his prodigious sighs. "Dear, dear! Perhaps you are right. I hope so, but I'd be fearfully disappointed."

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Basil waited. Dr. Marsac decided to gratify him.

"For a long time Europe has wanted to know more than it does of the Lady of Death. I fancy you haven't her kind in Worcester. Eh? A prize for whom any policeman would give his head, or his imitation of one, such as Lacrosse's. Whence she comes, or where she goes, we do not know. Some woman ornaments her throat or decorates her lovely fingers with a jewel. A great jewel—so great and well known in the quarters where jewels are known, that it would seem no one would dare steal it. Suddenly there is a cry. Perhaps a gasp. It may be even a shriek of horror. Who knows? None has been there at the moment. But the jewel is gone. Its wearer is dead, just as was our lamented Baroness of yesterday."

The speaker was silent long enough to finish his drink. He nodded pleasantly to Basil, in mute compliment upon the taste of the highball, rubbed his hands across his stomach and went on.

"Tragic deaths, all of them. More so, if I may suggest it, than yesterday's. The Baroness mercifully was shot. That is what would excuse my taking a fancy to you if I subscribed to the Inspector's theory that you have replaced, or are, The Man With The Duck's Bill. Shooting is more merciful than strangling, and all of the others have been strangled for their jewels. But just as was the case yesterday, The Swan leaves no doubts behind her. She enjoys her little joke on the police. The tiny crystal carving, a swan in miniature, invariably is found with the body. Our Lady of Death has a rare sense of humor. I should like to meet her."

"You mean, actually," asked Basil, "that she has succeeded in mystifying the police—through a whole series of these crimes?"

"The police of every country in Europe," declared the doctor. "I am told that she is known by her reputa-

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tion in your own country—where she has been watched for as an immigrant. So many of our most skilled and interesting people go eventually to America, you know."

"Come, come, Doctor!" Basil exclaimed. "You are describing a figure of the imagination to me."

The other attempted his serious air.

"I assure you, my new friend, The Swan is very real. A fascinating mystery of the police who trades her fascinations for something very like a shudder when she and her henchman have been in our midst."

"Her henchman? You mean——?"

"The one of whom Lacrosse muttered, as you called it. But shall we not go back to the beginning of the pair, if you are quite interested?"

Again Basil felt the conviction that Dr. Marsac had come to deliberately study, dissect, probe him. He knew that while he beamed and talked, the doctor was watching every mental reaction revealed in his face, seeking some sign that he played a part.

"Please," Basil begged in reply to the doctor's suggestion. "I foresee a chapter of horrors."

"I think it is in the police records," the doctor went on genially, "that it was quite near here, along the coast, that The Swan first came to official attention. Before I was honored with the sad duties of medical examiner. The house still stands, I am told, on the Lower road between Mentone and Monte Carlo. I've meant to see it, some day. It is deserted now.

"There was a death there, that never has been explained. It occurs that this was the only death of a man ever definitely laid to The Swan. The rest have been, so sadly! women, for it is women who think it necessary to ornament their loveliness with costly gems. In this first murder there was no robbery concerned—so far as is known. I forget the details, and the identity,

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of the unfortunate gentleman, but at the side of the body, which had been strangled, was the crystal swan. Its début, so to speak. It was the lady's first gesture —the first display of her rare good humor with her enemies, the police.

"Since then, the crystal swan has shown up periodically. The last time, I think, was in Munich. A rich widow celebrated the end of her period of bereavement with a ball. She had gathered her baubles from their safety box. She was particular to wear a string of carved emeralds with a history almost as long as that of the Harlequin pearls."

Dr. Marsac raised his fat hands to express resignation to dismay.

"The widow was found by the side of a pool in her fountain garden. Her throat was bare, save for the strangler's mark. There was mystery for a day. It remained for Giroff, The Great Giroff who is on his way to replace our poor Lacrosse, to drop over from Paris and poke about among the gold fishes in the fountain pool. He brought up a tiny crystal swan, which must have slid into the water. The emeralds have retired into seeming oblivion. The Swan shrouds her disposal of the rare gems she steals with as much mystery as surrounds herself."

The doctor had got out of his chair and moved about the room while he talked. Apparently he enjoyed his subject.

"You must have more reason than a crystal swan," Basil observed, "to identify the strangler as a woman. A woman isn't good at that method."

"You forget the other, The Man With The Duck's Bill. Charming picture one gets of him from his soubriquet! It is he, The Swan's faithful servant, who is the strangler. I am particularly interested in his skill. My brother medical examiners who have had the pleasure

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of examining his work say that he has a fashion peculiarly his own. But I digress!

"The Man With The Duck's Bill has been seen. A most grotesque figure, it appears. He has been heard of, through police spies, in the underworld where he pays periodic visits. In Paris, Berlin—and in Italy. The spies continue that this creature boasts of his misdeeds and credits the planning of them and their boldness, to the pretty little lady, mistress of his allegiance, if not his body. As to the latter possibility, we do not know. But he boasts of her as The Swan, which explains the police adoption of the designation, and their certainty that if they wish to pull the Duck's bill, they must first clip The Swan's wings. But, ah! none has been hopefully close on her trail until our Lacrosse finds the crystal, with the Harlequins gone, but with you on the scene. He still entertains his hope; he's stubborn. For I can still see his man out there on the street through your window."

Smiling dryly, Basil rubbed his nose. "He was not complimentary to my face," he observed. "I can't believe my nose is as long as a duck's."

Dr. Marsac moved a hand. "All that saved you yesterday was the bullet in the heart of the Baroness. The Swan's henchman has always strangled. The shape of your face is a minor discrepancy any policeman could explain away if explanation were needed to give him the triumph of the guillotine over The Swan."

The medical examiner gave signs of taking his departure, reaching for his hat and stick. His wide back was turned when Basil pleaded:

"You'll hope with me, won't you, Doctor, that this chap from Paris, the Giroff who is coming, you say, to take matters up where Lacrosse leaves off,—you'll hope with me that he decides I'm much too good looking ever to be confounded with a man with a duck's beak, and

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that I like the ladies I serve to be less resourceful than your Swan?"

Dr. Marsac wheeled, again with that incredible agility which, in the room of the Baroness, had once or twice utterly amazed Basil. And again the twinkle had totally disappeared from beneath his huge lids.

"Make no mistake, my young friend, Giroff will bag The Swan for this murder of the Baroness von Stromberg, and whoever has served her, the Duck's Bill or another, will be severed at the neck quite beyond the skill at repairs of even a medical examiner."

The twinkle returned as instantly as it had disappeared. Dr. Marsac bubbled good cheer while he shook Basil's hand. His "Au revoir!" from the door was a booming broadside of hearty friendliness.

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Chapter Four

THE LITTLE FELLOW SHOWS UP

DR. MARSAC did not come again to Basil's quarters. However, Lacrosse did.

The man from Paris, Giroff, "The Great Giroff" as Dr. Marsac dubbed him, had not appeared on the scene. Lacrosse was proceeding to hunt stubbornly, and stolidly, for some trace of the elusive Swan and her sinister henchman, The Man With The Duck's Bill, or any other who had served her, as the police insisted she would have been served, in the actual murder.

Lacrosse came later in the day of the medical examiner's strange visit, and grudgingly displayed cablegrams from Worcester which appeared to give Basil a clean bill of health. The Inspector refused to be convinced.

He developed a habit of turning up at Basil's hotel without warning and demanding that he accompany him to the house which had been the home of the unfortunate Baroness Hilda. Here Basil was called upon to reenact with irritating detail, and repeatedly, each incident of his visit that fateful afternoon.

Always Marie hovered in the background, silently accusing him with her great blue eyes, shaking her head and muttering whenever he would come to the point of his discovery, through the porch windows, of the prone body on the green rug of the drawing room.

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